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ABSTRACT

Institutional responsibility for assisting underprepared students was discussed in a caucus session. Four questions were addressed as follows: (1) to what extent should colleges and universities be responsible for ameliorating academic deficiencies among high risk students? (2) should separate facilities be established to serve high risk students, or can their needs be met by existing offices and staff position? (3) how can student development professionals meet the counseling needs of these students? and (4) are there steps college and university personnel can be taking to improve academic preparation at the elementary, middle, and high school levels? The consensus among participants in the caucus was that it is the responsibility of institutions of higher education to ameliorate academic deficiencies, and this responsibility does not rest solely with community colleges and other open access institutions. A college or university is responsible for providing those support services necessary to facilitate the success of the students it recruits. While separate facilities and programs may stigmatize high risk students, they may be more likely to serve all the needs of the underprepared. Counselors and advisors can more effectively meet the needs of underprepared students by creating programs which foster the development of the whole person rather than limiting themselves to traditional academic concerns. College and university personnel can reach down to provide programs which enhance skill development and promote positive attitudes toward education among younger students. Contains 81 references. (SM)

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Caucus Session:

Institutional Responsibility for

Meeting the Needs of Underprepared Students

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Abstract

Caucus sessions were held as round table discussions at the Annual Convention of the American College Personnel Association in Washington, D. C., March 28-April 1, 1989. This paper summarizes the points presented at a caucus session entitled "Institutional Responsibility for Meeting the Needs of Underprepared Students."

The questions to be addressed by this caucus session were as follows:

1. To what extent should colleges and universities be responsible for ameliorating academic deficiencies among high risk students?

2. Should separate facilities be established specifically to serve high risk students, or can their needs be met by existing offices and staff positions?

3. How can student development professionals more effectively meet the counseling and advising needs of underprepared students?

4. Are there any steps college and university personnel can or should be taking to improve academic preparation at the elementary, middle and high school levels?

Institutional Responsibility for Meeting the Needs of Underprepated Students

For purposes of this caucus session the term "underprepared students" was defined as students not adequately prepared to do college level work in one or more subject areas at a given institution. Common measures which might be used to describe the underprepared student population, such as high school grades or standardized test scores, might vary considerably between different types of institutions, e.g., the open access community college versus the major research university. However, even the most selective independent liberal arts institution will enroll some students who are less well prepared in specific subject areas and may require special services in order to be academically competitive and earn the grades required to remain in school and ultimately graduate. The purpose of this caucus session was to facilitate discussion concerning the responsibility of institutions for meeting the needs of underprepared students.

Question 1: To what extent should colleges and universities be responsible for ameliorating academic deficiencies among high risk students?

One question commonly asked is whether developmental education should be the responsibility of the community college, not the public research university. If academically deficient students are restricted to enrolling only in community colleges are these students granted equal access to higher education? Will the problem merely resurface during the transition from two-year to four-year institution? Do we thus limit

enrollment of culturally diverse and disadvantaged students at our more selective institutions? What implications does this tendency toward homogeneity have for student development both within and outside the classroom? Is liberal education in an undifferentiated institution truly preparation for life?

What problems arise when more selective institutions enroll students who are not sufficiently prepared to perform at the required level? Often high risk students are placed in separate programs and thus bear the stigma of remediation. If mainstreamed instead, the result may be a bimodal distribution of abilities within the same classroom. Most faculty members are not trained to meet the academic needs of high risk students. Some may refuse to provide the extra assistance needed, while others may not know how to help. Some faculty members argue that special programs and support services undermine the role of the faculty advisor, while others complain that they have neither the time nor resources to meet the needs of underprepared students. Left to fend for themselves, underprepared students are likely to experience academic failure and loss of self esteem. They may drop out or be pushed out, never to return. The institution and ultimately the nation pay the price for this loss of human potential.

Question 2: Should separate facilities be established specifically to serve high risk students, or can their needs be met by existing offices and staff positions?

Among the arguments for separate facilities are the need for proactive services, including more intrusive counseling; the desirability

of a centralized location so that it is easier to seek a variety of services; expanded hours for support services, especially in the evening; and faculty and staff members specifically trained to understand the needs of high risk students. Developmental teaching and learning must focus on the process as much or more than the content. Faculty and staff members must model skills, attitudes, and behaviors which are conducive to success. The underprepared student may not only be indifferent or passive, but downright resistant. Services should be required, not voluntary. By providing separate facilities and services the institution is making a commitment to retention of the high risk student while also avoiding the dilution of the quality of core curriculum courses for the rest of the student body.

While many administrators may support the concept of developmental education, particularly as a retention tool for underrepresented student populations, they are also likely to resent the reallocation of funds to separate facilities designed to serve only this limited group. Many question the cost effectiveness of isolated services for a small sample of students. This is but one of the arguments against separate facilities. Others include the need to normalize the program in order to avoid stigmatizing students; the lack of faculty support unless they are directly involved; and the idea that other students can serve as role models for those at risk.

One model which serves all students is Supplemental Instruction (SI). A specially selected and trained peer leads a discussion/review group for a specific section of a class and models such behaviors as note taking and predicting exam questions. Can programs such as SI or study

groups in learning resource centers meet all the developmental needs of underprepared students? Will the high risk student participate in a program like SI voluntarily? A review of the literature would seem to indicate that while programs such as SI play an important role in fostering student success for all students, those who need these programs the most are those least likely to participate. Underprepared students have unique affective as well as cognitive needs and require individualized attention.

A question which commonly arises is whether developmental services should fall under the student affairs or academic affairs umbrella. It is important that a link be established to academic affairs for reasons of credibility. For programs which include teaching components in composition, mathematics, and reading it is logical to report to academic affairs. However, many support services, e.g., counseling, advising, and tutorial services, are staffed by student development professionals with a natural liaison to student affairs.

Question 3: How can student development professionals more effectively meet the counseling and advising needs of underprepared students?

A primary consideration in designing services is to know your institution, i.e., what ideas will work, what kinds of services will receive acceptance, etc. It is also critical to understand some of the ways in which underprepared students may be different from the rest of the student body. Some high risk students may not as yet have set educational goals, or their goals may be completely unrealistic. Others may be pursuing a higher education in order to obtain job skills or the

credentials necessary for their chosen occupations. They may lack interest in any subject areas they deem "irrelevant." Motivation is often the key problem for high risk students, particularly those with high aptitude (e.g., SAT scores) and low achievement (e.g., high school grade point average.) In general, underprepared students have little self confidence, especially as related to academics, and are characterized by a lack of self esteem. In addition, some are disabled or members of minority groups and may feel isolated or put upon to educate the remainder of the campus community regarding individual differences.

There are innumerable ways in which student development professionals can improve counseling and advising services for underprepared students, if permitted. Restraints may be ideological as well as budgetary. Among the topics which might be addressed in programs for high risk students are goal setting, decision making, values clarification, career exploration, study strategies, time management, communication skills including assertiveness training, understanding the core curriculum and degree requirements, stress reduction, relaxation training, test and/or math anxiety desensitization, health and wellness issues (e.g., diet, alcohol and other drugs, birth control, sexually transmitted disease), and personal empowerment. A highly selective cadre of paid paraprofessionals can serve as tutors and/or peer advisors once they have received extensive training.

Question 4: Are there any steps college and university personnel can or should be taking to improve academic preparation at the elementary,

middle, and high school levels?

There are two basic types of outreach programs which higher education professionals, business and industry leaders, and others might provide for students in elementary, middle, and high school. The first type is motivational, such as those programs which provide incentives for students to remain in the educational system and eventually go to college. The second type is more intrusive and involves skill development. Higher education professionals may be among the most qualified to provide the latter.

All children must have their basic needs met, including validation of their personal environment. They also should have the opportunity to appreciate that learning can be fun! Through institutional partnerships, collaborative efforts, and state and federally funded projects such as summer bridge programs and Upward Bound, higher education professionals can "reach down" to children in grades K-12. However, in order to promote maximum gains it may be necessary to develop links earlier than the middle school level. By the age of 12 students are already subject to peer pressure "not to excel." They have already determined what is "cool" and what is not, and are likely to have already ruled out a number of potential college majors. These trends have an especially negative impact on mathematics education, which is so critical to remaining competitive in a society of high technology. Thus, programs directed at an elementary school population may be most likely to result in long term benefits for the students, our educational institutions, and the nation. Parental involvement may also be a vital factor related to the long term success of outreach programs. Student behavior is easily influenced by

teacher and parental expectations. Programs which communicate realistic and high expectations will encourage student growth and commitment.

Conclusion

The consensus among participants in the caucus session was that it is the responsibility of institutions of higher education to ameliorate academic deficiencies, and that this responsibility does not rest solely with community colleges and other open access institutions. A college or university is responsible for providing those support services necessary to facilitate the success of the students it recruits and enrolls, whether student athletes, members of minority groups, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, disabled students, or students who are merely academically underprepared.

While separate programs and facilities may stigmatize high risk students, they may be more likely to serve all the needs, both cognitive and affective, of the underprepared. High risk students may never seek the services they need, or may wait until their academic records are irrevocably damaged. Programs for underprepared students must be highly structured and required, not voluntary and available upon demand.

Counselors and advisors can more effectively meet the needs of underprepared students by creating programs which foster the development of the "whole person" rather than limiting themselves to traditional academic concerns. Services must be individualized and intrusive. Counselors must be prepared to reject some of their preconceived notions and may need to adopt a more directive counseling style.

College and university personnel can "reach down" to provide programs which enhance skill development and promote positive attitudes toward education among younger students. Those projects directed at elementary school children may in the long run prove most effective.

There are countless ways in which higher educators can play a role in ameliorating academic deficiencies among students at all levels of the educational process. To become involved is to play a vital role in enhancing cultural pluralism, improving the quality of life, and strengthening the future of the nation.

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